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SUBJECT: IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN: HILL TRIBES, ENVIRONMENTALISM, AND POLITICS

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 75 (NGOS ASSIST HILL TRIBES)
¶B. 08 CHIANG MAI 140 (RELOCATIONS HURT HILL TRIBES)
¶C. 08 CHIANG MAI 91 (REDUCED BURNING LESSENS POLLUTION)
¶D. CHIANG MAI 84 (GEM SMUGGLING)
¶E. 08 CHIANG MAI 114 (SMUGGLING OF BURMESE STONES)
¶F. 07 CHIANG MAI 131 (MIXED HMONG PROGRESS)

CHIANG MAI 00000109 001.2 OF 004

Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

¶1. (SBU) In northern Thailand, differing opinions of environmental cause and effect have led to highly charged debates about forest management policies, often pitting "conservationists" against agriculturally-dependent ethnic hill tribe minorities and their supporters. The Royal Forest Department (RFD) has accused upland farmers of environmental mismanagement- highlighting the detrimental effects of "slash-and-burn" farming- and has implemented mechanisms intended to restrict their use of forests and watersheds. This cable, part one in a series on highland agriculture and land tenure, will focus on the political ecology of forests in northern Thailand.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: Land use policies in northern Thailand have been framed in terms of environmental conservation, with particular emphasis placed on the slowing of deforestation and watershed degradation. However, the environmental merits of some RTG policies, such as the establishment of plantation forests and the promotion of input-intensive cash crop agriculture, are questionable. Thus, "Qen" policies, which demonize hill tribe farming techniques, have been used to reinforce state control of upland areas and to displace highlanders, some of whom are stateless and have little legal recourse. There are, however, indications that the RFD has begun to see the importance of including upland dwellers in their environmental protection strategies. End Summary and Comment.

Geopolitics of Northern Thailand

¶3. (SBU) In geopolitical terms, northern Thailand- and its many ethnic hill tribe minorities- have been characterized by both real and perceived communist sympathies during the Vietnam War. More recently, northern Thailand has been politically important because of its permeable borders with Laos and conflict-ridden Burma. The porous nature of these borders, combined with the relative inaccessibility of the highlands, has contributed to illicit trade in opium, methamphetamines, and gems, as well as to cross-border migration (both legal and illegal) (ref D and E). As a result, highland people have often been viewed as unruly liabilities for an otherwise stable state. Hill tribe communities have also been seen as colorful tourist attractions, but, to many ethnic Thais, hill tribe people are ethnically distinct and not truly "Thai." The influx of highland minorities from Burma in recent years has played into the RTG's (Royal Thai Government) national security concerns regarding illegal immigration and has contributed to the government's reticence to grant citizenship to many hill tribe people.

Ecological Importance of Northern Thailand

¶4. (U) Northern Thailand also occupies an important ecological niche in Southeast Asia, as the north's bucolic forests provide many important ecosystem services for the rest of Thailand. The headwaters of Thailand's primary river system, the Chao Phraya, lie in the northern uplands, and these waters play an important

role in irrigating Bangkok and the central plain. As such, any degradation of the upland watersheds has an effect on the flow of water to central Thailand's agricultural fields, factories, and cities. The central plain's dependence on upland watersheds has led to increased scrutiny of upland forests and those who inhabit them. Part of Northern Thailand also forms a portion of the Mekong River Basin; land use practices that impact downstream water quality can have a negative effect on the inland fisheries that provide livelihood and food security for millions of Laotians, Cambodians and Vietnamese.

¶5. (U) Thailand's forested northern uplands house much of the country's biodiversity, and logging and other methods of deforestation are seen as direct threats to Thailand's natural heritage and eco-tourist economy. While the RTG banned logging in 1989 after decades of unsustainable logging, it is now moving towards a policy of sustainable wood harvest coupled with a goal of 40 percent forest cover. Illegal logging in poorly policed border areas remains a problem. The agricultural techniques used by northern Thailand's highland farmers, most notably "slash-and-burn" farming, are often denounced by government officials, environmentalists, and the media as inefficient, wasteful, and destructive. As reported by post, provincial governments have recently taken a more active role in reducing crop burning (ref C). Since 2007, Chiang Mai province has banned burning; enforcement, however, has been rather lax.

¶6. (U) Growing awareness of climate change has led to two-fold criticisms of highland agricultural techniques. "Slash-and-burn" farming is believed to destroy important carbon sinks (e.g. forests) while simultaneously releasing heat-trapping carbon into the atmosphere during the burning process. In the last two years alone, there have been over 10

articles criticizing slash-and-burn farming published in "The Nation," one of Thailand's leading English-language newspapers.

Hilltribe Agriculture: Sustainable or Not?

¶7. (U) Conflicting views about what is pejoratively called "slash-and-burn" agriculture have also complicated efforts to create sustainable forest management policies in the north. For decades, international agencies, national governments, and others have claimed that "slash-and-burn" techniques (also called "shifting cultivation") cause forest loss, soil erosion, sedimentation in the lowlands, an increase in global warming, and other forms of ecological degradation. However, some academics have told pol staff that highland farmers, especially the Karen, have developed ecologically appropriate agricultural practices well suited to the sustainable management of forest resources.

¶8. (U) Traditionally, the Karen (and some other highland farmers) practice rotational shifting cultivation where forest vegetation is felled and burned in the dry season. Many farmers and environmental scientists believe that burning foliage before the onset of the rainy season releases nutrients into the soil and serves as a pest management technique, reducing the need for both fertilizer and pesticides. These cleared and burned fields are cultivated for one or more years and then left to lie fallow for several years, allowing for re-growth of forest species. Hill tribe farmers carefully harvest crops from their cultivated fields and wild species from their fallow fields. Post has been told that farmers typically rotate through 8-20 plots of land, cultivating one and letting the others lie fallow.

¶9. (U) In meetings with pol staff, proponents of rotational shifting agriculture argue that this technique involves only temporary use of forest lands, while permanent settlements with fixed agricultural plots result in greater loss of species diversity and forest vegetation. Others have also contended that the fallow periods so integral to shifting cultivation promote greater carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation than do permanent agricultural techniques. Fallow periods can also stabilize soils and allow forest animals to re-colonize previously cultivated areas.

Environmental and Ethnic Conflict

¶10. (U) Environmental conflicts in northern Thailand have also taken on an ethnic dimension, as lowland farmers (primarily of ethnic Thai descent), accuse upland farmers (many of whom are hill tribe minorities) of contaminating water supplies and causing erosion. However, distinctions are rarely this neat, and "lowland" Thai farmers now outnumber their hill tribe minority counterparts in the uplands.

¶11. (SBU) Popular conceptions of ethnic hill tribes have also been used to reinforce or refute particular environmental positions. The Karen have often been held up as conservators of the natural environment, and their patterns of shifting cultivation have been viewed as an environmentally friendly alternative to commercial agriculture. As such, NGOs and academics often highlight Karen practices when defending the right of highlanders to manage forest resources. For example, one American study abroad program based in northern Thailand incorporates an in-depth examination of Karen farming techniques into a course on local ecological knowledge. In the course, the Karen are used as an example of an ethnic group which has developed cultural adaptations well suited for forest ecosystems.

¶12. (SBU) The Hmong, however, are often portrayed as upland villains, a reputation gained, in part, because of their association with opium cultivation and insurgency (ref F). Academics have told pol staff that environmentalists have heaped vitriol on the Hmong because of their use of pioneer shifting cultivation. Unlike rotational shifting cultivation, pioneer shifting cultivation involves the clearing and burning of virgin forest plots. These plots are farmed intensively for just a few years before diminishing soil fertility and increasing weed infestation force the farmer to move on to a new virgin forest plot. Farmers rarely, if ever, reutilize a previously farmed plot.

¶13. (SBU) The Hmong have also been criticized for their adoption of commercial agriculture. The production of cash crops, such as cabbages or strawberries, usually requires more intensive use of fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides. These agrochemicals can leach into water supplies, kill fish in river systems, damage soils, and even hamper crop production if used incorrectly. Although the Hmong were encouraged to produce these cash crops (instead of opium) through the implementation of alternative development programs, they have now been accused of degrading natural environments.

¶14. (SBU) Although ethnic stereotypes portray the Karen as forest conservators and the Hmong as forest villains, these monolithic categories are not entirely accurate. Many Karen produce cash crops using environmentally problematic farming techniques and not all Hmong practice pioneer shifting cultivation. True or not, ethnic stereotypes- some of which characterize all hill tribe farmers as troublesome, backwards, and destroyers of the fragile uplands- have been used as justification for more stringent forest regulations. As such, the RFD has tended to view forests as needing protection from local people and has pursued policies which exclude highlanders from the forests on which they depend. Indeed, the RFD has relocated villages found within the boundaries of newly-declared national parks and has arrested villagers for encroaching on protected forests (ref B).

¶15. (SBU) In conversations with pol staff, several NGOs have highlighted apparent contradictions in RFD policies. While small scale upland farmers have been accused of encroaching on national parks and protected forests, large tree and fruit plantations have been established in the uplands as part of larger reforestation strategies. The environmental science surrounding tree and fruit plantations is fuzzy, and some scientists claim that these plantations will not help the RFD reach its environmental goals. Tree plantations are heavy users

of water and may strain already fragile upland watersheds.

Environmental scientists also argue that some forms of plantation forestry could increase erosion. Thus, it seems as if political and economic factors play as large a role in RFD policy decisions as do ecological goals.

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RFD Starting to Encourage Community Participation

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¶16. (U) There are signs that the RFD has realized that it does not have the resources or manpower necessary to police all the protected forests in Thailand and that excluding local people from resource management undermines conservation goals. The RFD has therefore looked for creative ways to educate communities about sustainable forest use and to reward them for efforts aimed at stemming deforestation. In 2008, the RFD launched the "Love the Forest and the Community Program," an education initiative and competition designed to encourage local villagers to develop sustainable practices for forest use. The RFD, in conjunction with the Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding Company, will grant a trophy and a 200,000 baht (US$5,882) prize to the community which develops the most systematic preservation plan for their forests.

¶17. (U) Communities must consider the ecological, economic and social aspects of their forest preservation plans. The Khao Wong community forest in Chaiyaphum became the winner of the first national contest in 2008 with a plan that decreases deforestation by phasing out charcoal production. Currently, there are over 7,300 community forests registered with the program, and 700 community forests are expected to enter the 2009 competition.

¶18. (U) In Tak province, forest patrols are now joint undertakings made up of forest rangers and villagers from local Karen communities. The Eastern Thungyai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary is home to seven Karen communities, and Karen villagers help the patrols look for evidence of illegal logging, hunting, or cattle-gazing. The forest patrols also report on wildlife sightings. According to the chief of the Eastern Thungyai Naresuan forest division, involvement of local communities has made forest patrols more effective. Reports of illegal activities have decreased; large animal sightings have increased; and communication between forestry officials and local communities has improved.

¶19. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
ANDERSON